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AN ILLINOIS BURNT OFFERING

Dr. J. F. Snyder.

On page 83 of "Historic Morgan and Classic Jacksonville," by Charles M. Eames, published in 1885, is the following account of a strange incident that occurred in the early settlement of Morgan county: "In 1834, near Middle Creek, in Cass county, but in Morgan then, a religious society of fanatics was organized, who not only believed in witchcraft, but actually made offerings of themselves, and were burned at the stake, to appease and propitiate, as they believed, their offended Deity; and cast lots to determine who of their numbers should be burned at the stake. Once the lot fell on an old lady, whom the others tied and bound to the stake, and when she began to burn she screamed so loud and pitifully that Mr. Elmore, hunting near by, broke the door open with a fence-rail, and released the burning woman from the stake, broke up the meeting, and the grand jury of Morgan county indicted many of the members, and the religious fanatics left the country."

In the *Courier*, a newspaper published in Jacksonville, there appeared, in 1876, this version of the occurrence, differing somewhat in detail from the foregoing account: "During the last week we have been told by several of our old citizens that early in the history of this county (Morgan) an old man was sacrificed by a religious society. Desiring to get at the truth of the matter, we have been diligently searching among the old papers at the court house, when this morning we hit upon one that furnished us the following facts: About 1832, when

Cass county was part of Morgan, there was a religious society, of about thirty members, living on the Sangamon bottom. They were about three miles from Channingville, and their faith was a kind of spiritualism, and, among their other rites, they believed in human sacrifice. The time for offering up their first victim came, and lots were drawn to see upon whom the destiny should fall. It fell upon an old man, who was placed upon an altar, and the wood that had been prepared was set on fire. A man named Elmore was out that day hunting and, hearing the screams of the old man, he ran up and rescued him from the fire, but not until he was badly burned. He had a regular hand to hand combat with the members of this society before he could get the man from the fire. The grand jury indicted the men who did the deed, and they were brought to this city for trial. The charge against them was riot. The case was tried in the October term of the Circuit court, A. D. 1833, his honor, Judge Samuel D. Lockwood presiding. The case stands 'The People vs. William Clark, Moses Clay and others; riot.' John J. Hardin was the State's attorney who prosecuted the suit, while Murray McConnel and Walter Jones were for the defense. The jury brought in a verdict of guilty and the parties were fined \$3.00 and costs. Certainly they assessed very small fines in those days. If such an act should occur now, lynch law would probably be enforced. We give these facts, as they are a part of the early history of our county."

In this narrative the historian of the *Courier* has stated the main general facts of the intended sacrifice, but concluded it with the court record of an earlier and entirely different case.

Owing to the very considerable lapse of time since the event occurred, it has been difficult to ascertain what actually did take place there. All the actors in the extraordinary affair have long since passed away, and the accounts of it, transmitted orally from generation to

generation, have become so varied and distorted as to be utterly unreliable. The few still living who heard the incident related by those at the time cognizant of all its details, speak of it very reluctantly for fear that by so doing they may give offense to the highly respectable descendants of those who participated in it, now residing in their midst. However, long and patient investigation has been rewarded by a close approximation to all that actually transpired in the attempted sacrifice mentioned.

The assertion that it was the act of an organized society of religious fanatics is a mistake; all those engaged in it being members of one family, with a few exceptions, illiterate and grossly superstitious. The women, some of whom probably were Baptists, were emotional and perhaps hysterical — of the class who always did the loudest shouting at camp-meetings — and the men, not then church members, were typical backwoodsman who regarded the rifle and dog, the axe and jug, as first essentials of the pioneer's cabin equipment. The patriarch of that family, later in life a Baptist, was John B. Witty, a native of McMinn county, Tennessee, who there married a daughter of John Lucas, and not long thereafter migrated to Kentucky, where he remained several years. His elbow room there becoming too much restricted by the rapidly increasing population of his neighborhood, about the year 1826 he loaded his household goods and family into a wagon or two and struck the trail for the far-famed Sangamon country up in Illinois. Arriving here in the fall he settled in the northeastern part of Morgan county, near Middle creek, six or eight miles south of its confluence with the Sangamon river. There, in the timbered "barrens," he selected his claim and built his log cabin — on the northwestern part of Section 32, in Township 19, of Range 8 west — now in Richmond precinct in Cass county; and

that cabin, time-worn and dilapidated, was still standing there as lately as 1895.

Mr. Witty was one of the plain common people, a fair average of the class of pioneers who settled in the barrens in those days, not polished in manners, nor highly educated, nor very enterprising nor progressive, but an honest, law-abiding citizen and good neighbor. His family comprised several sons and daughters, the most, or all, of whom were married at the date of the occurrence to which we allude. One daughter, with her husband, named Pleasant Rose, was living with the old folks. Another daughter, Polly, of odd and impulsive nature, married to a man named Hickey, and living near by, was also there at the time. A brother-in-law of Mr. Witty, named Bennet, and his wife, were there, having come some time before from their home in Kentucky on a visit to the Witty family.

It was late in the fall, or the beginning of winter, in 1834, when the Bennets, having terminated their visit, were prepared to return to Kentucky. To give them an appropriate farewell a family gathering had been called at the Witty homestead, and suitable cheer provided from the products of the chase and the field, and a two-gallon jug of whisky, by the social custom of the times indispensable on such occasions. On the specified evening all the adult sons and their wives, daughters and their husbands, and other kinfolks, had assembled there and enjoyed with zest the bountiful feast prepared for them. One of the married daughters, Mrs. Berry, then recovering from an attack of sickness, unable to leave her bed in the corner of the cabin, could not join the others at the table, but was with them in spirit and good will. Outside the cabin the starlit night was still and cold, but within, the hickory logs briskly blazing in the spacious fireplace diffused a glow of cheerful comfort throughout the room.

The banquet ended, the company sat around in social chat, occasionally sampling the contents of the jug. They no doubt needed that solace to alleviate the sadness of parting from the Bennets. Some of them were good singers, and as their spirits rose they struck up the old familiar camp-meeting hymns, and sung them with camp-meeting force. The psychological effect of the sacred music was soon apparent. Mrs. Berry, a young woman of high nervous temperament, sitting up in bed supported by her mother sitting behind her with arms around her, joined in the singing and became much affected and agitated. Suddenly she bit her mother's hand spasmodically, and then leaping out of bed began shouting and clapping her hands as if in a transport of joy.

Her spiritual exaltation was contagious. Others shouted, some prayed, and all were much excited. As they continued in that vein the exhilaration and excitement increased, working them up to a condition of religious frenzy. They became wildly convicted of their sins, and in despair called upon the Lord to know what they should do to be saved. At that stage one of the party professed to have received a revelation declaring that Divine wrath would be appeased only by the offering of a human sacrifice.

They then beseeched the Lord to give them a sign or token by which they might know His choice of the victim to be thus immolated. But no such sign appearing, they concluded that the old matron of the flock — known through all the barrens as "Granny" Witty — was the fittest one of their number for vicarious atonement. Until then they were marching around the room in single file, the old man heading the procession with his flint-lock rifle on his shoulder, and all loudly singing and shouting. A halt was called and the victim seized, stripped, bound, and anointed with bear's grease. She was then laid on the broad stone hearth to await conclusion of the cere-

monies, and the march and chanting was resumed. No attention was paid to her frantic screams, or intense suffering. Her eyebrows and hair were burned away, and her stifled cries growing weaker betokened the near approach of exhaustion and collapse.

Just then the cabin door was suddenly opened, and William Lewis, a neighbor whose cabin was a mile or more distant, came into the room. Recovering from his surprise at what he saw going on, he said, by way of apology for his intrusion, that having heard a member of the Witty family was sick, he came over to offer his services to sit up, or go after the doctor, or render any other necessary assistance that he could.

Not paying the least attention to what Lewis said, they seized him, exclaiming: "Lo! Our supplication has been heard, and this is the one sent us by the Lord for sacrifice." The women at once released the old lady, put on her clothes, and placed her on the bed. After a desperate struggle—in the course of which almost all of Lewis's clothing was torn off—the frenzied men succeeded in securely binding him with strong ropes, and then placed him on the hearth preparatory to his incineration on the fire-place altar. They next barred the door, both to prevent the exit of any of their own number and to guard against further intrusion of outsiders. Then resuming their shouting and singing, again marching around as before, as they passed by their prostrate victim each one gave him a kick, or prodded him with some sharp instrument.

Throughout that strange orgy neither levity or malevolence was manifested by any of the actors; the evident earnestness of every expression and motion plainly indicating they were under the spell of temporary lunacy, or that entastic ecstasy which incites the erratic movements of the Holy Rollers, the Doukhobors, and Shaking Quakers.

Tortured almost beyond endurance, Lewis vainly exerted every effort to free himself, at the same time mingling his vigorous cries for help with the howling of his tormentors. The time was very nearly at hand when he was to be placed upon the fire to complete the sacrifice, immediately upon the conclusion of the last verse of the hymn they were then singing.

It so happened that three settlers of that region, Julius Elmore, Amos Dick and Philip Hash, were out coon hunting that night, and in passing through that neighborhood heard the unearthly clamor emanating from the Witty cabin. Apprehensive that the family might be in danger—possibly from an attack by outlaws—they hurried there to their defense. Elmore was the first to reach the cabin, and knocked and called loudly at the door for admission. Receiving no response, and finding the door fastened on the inside, he seized a fence rail and soon battered it open. By that time his two companions arrived, when rushing in they dragged Lewis from the fire and unbound him, but only after a furious combat with the delirious mob, whom they succeeded in overpowering and quelling.

The forcible entry of the coon hunters into the cabin was regarded by the distracted inmates as an unwarranted intrusion, and disturbance of their devotional rites, and as such they fiercely resented it, but confronted by those three armed and determined men they quieted down and gradually regained their senses.

Mr. Elmore immediately procured a wagon and team from a neighbor, and taking the old lady to his own home—some miles away—that night, sent for Dr. Pettit, a physician over in the edge of Menard county, to attend her, and she remained there until entirely well again.

Lewis was badly burned, besides having received fourteen punctured wounds, from which he bled so freely that the scanty clothing remaining on him was saturated

with his blood. Amos Dick and Philip Hash lost no time in getting him to his own home. Then Mr. Dick made such speed in traveling to Chandlerville that he had Dr. Chandler there before daylight next morning. Lewis was confined to his bed for many days before he recovered.

The Bennets, having had everything in readiness, set out for Kentucky early the next morning, and in time, arrived there safely.

This extraordinary incident, of course, created quite a commotion in that remote, sparsely settled district. Reports of it quickly spread all over the country, and every time repeated—particularly by gossiping women—there was some embellishment or exaggeration added. By many it was regarded as merely a drunken revel; but the more thoughtful, and piously inclined, saw in it an esoteric working of the spirit guided by supernatural power. There is but little doubt, however, that the inspiration drawn from that jug was the initial excitement. Liquor drinking was then the universal custom, though in this instance it is a reasonable assumption that the women there drank none of it, yet they did the wildest and loudest shouting.

At this distance of time, and in the light of subsequent well-known physical phenomena, the most plausible view of the affair is that it was a case of hypnotic hallucination, or epidemic ecstacy, similar to that which, under certain mental conditions, caused whole congregations of Quakers to shake and dance and incites insane ravings and cataleptic trances at camp meetings and religious revivals; the same insane delusion that moved those Russian fanatics of Manitoba, the Doukhobors, to cast off their clothing, throw away all they possessed, and in the dead of winter start off in a body, stark naked, in search of the Savior.

But the wounding and burning of Lewis shocked the moral sense of the community, and punishment of the

perpetrators of the outrage was loudly demanded. Steps for their prosecution were not long delayed. In searching the court records of Morgan county, at Jacksonville, the cause instituted was found on the docket entitled, "The People vs. John L. Witty and Pleasant Rose." The original complaint is not among the papers of the case on file. That the old gentleman, then familiarly known as Britton Witty—Britton being his middle name—was not included seems to support one version of the event, to the effect that a short time before Lewis entered the cabin Britton Witty left it, saying as he went, "This is hell's work." John Witty was his son, and Pleasant Rose his son-in-law.

"By the writ issued by Philip Hash, a justice of the peace, on March 25, 1835, reciting that a complaint has been made to said justice of the peace that an assault with intent to commit murder has been committed on the body of said William Lewis by John L. Witty and Pleasant Rose, you are commanded to take the bodies of said Witty and Rose and bring them forthwith before me to answer, etc." Dated March 25, 1835. Executed by John Lucas, constable, by taking their bodies, etc. There is no date on this return.

Transcript of proceedings before said justice Hash, recited that upon examination, the said defendants were committed to jail on March 25, 1835, and upon the following day were released by giving security to appear at the next term of the circuit court of Morgan county, Illinois. This transcript was certified on July 16, 1835.

At the July term of the Morgan county circuit court, 1835, the grand jury found a true bill against John L. Witty and also one against Pleasant Rose, the two indictments being alike. They were prepared by Stephen A. Douglas, State's attorney for that judicial district, and charge that these defendants, on the — day of ——, 1834, in and upon William Lewis did make an assault with a knife and other deadly weapons, and did

stab, beat, kick and bruise the said Lewis with the intent to kill and murder him.

Names of witnesses endorsed on the indictments. William Lewis, Ralph Elkin, Doctor Pettit and Dr. Charles Chandler.

At the same term indictments were returned against Nancy Witty, Nancy Rose and Sally Berry for the same offense it is charged, but the papers could not be found by the Morgan county circuit clerk. Bartlet Conyers gave bond for the appearance of Witty and Rose at the next (October) term of the said court.

At the October term, 1835, of the Morgan county circuit court the case of the People *vs.* John L. Witty was tried. Hon. Thomas Ford was the judge of the court and Stephen A. Douglas the prosecuting attorney. The witnesses for the people were William Lewis, Julius Elmore, Ralph Elkin, Dr. Pettit and Dr. Chandler. Wm. Lewis did not appear, and a warrant was issued for his arrest for contempt for not appearing. Later Lewis appeared and then caused a warrant to be issued for the arrest of John B. Witty, (the father of John L. Witty) and Ezekiel Lewis, and Henry McHenry for preventing the appearance of the said Wm. Lewis; but these defendants were discharged by the court.

The jury who tried Witty were: John Doyle, Orlando C. Cole, Elijah Bacon, Andrew W. Newcomb, Nathaniel Stout, Andrew W. Hughes, of the regular panel, and James M. Gentry, John Hurst, Jacob Cassel, Jeddyer Webster and Joshua Sprague, summoned from the bystanders, who found him guilty, and fixed his punishment at one year in the penitentiary.

Witty's attorney then entered motion for a new trial on the ground that the juror, Doyle was not a naturalized citizen, and for other reasons. An affidavit of Doyle was filed, admitting that he was not a citizen, and the court granted a new trial after which both Witty and Rose obtained a change of venue on account of the prejudice of

the people of the county, and the case was sent to Sangamon county, McHenry signing bonds for their appearance there. Witty was represented by attorneys Walker and Hewett. The cases against the three women were continued until July, 1836, when they were stricken from the docket, with leave to reinstate. The witnesses for Witty in the case tried in Jacksonville were Sylvester Hunt, James Conyers and John Lucas.

In February, 1836, subpoenas were issued to witnesses Samuel Ray, Bartlett Conyers and James Hawthorn for Witty, returnable at the March term, 1836, of the Sangamon county circuit court, which were returned "served." On March 15, 1836, John L. Witty filed an affidavit for a continuance on account of the absence of John Berry, Sylvester Hunt, John Lucas, James Conyers and Henry McHenry. In this affidavit he swears that he expects to prove by Berry that if said Lewis was stabbed that it was not the result of any previous combination between this defendant and others; that whatever force or violence was used toward said Lewis proceeded from some mental derangement which affected this affiant and the others concerned, destroying legal accountability and there was no malice but kind feeling on part of this affiant and others concerned toward said Lewis. By the other absent witnesses he expects he can prove that this affiant labored under said mental derangement, by his conduct and other circumstances, shortly after the time said Lewis is alleged to have been stabbed.

On May 24, 1836, subpoenas were issued for the witnesses named in Witty's affidavit, to appear at the July term, 1836. Lucas and Hunt were served, but Conyers, Berry and McHenry were not found. The return was made by James A. Graves, deputy for Wm. O'Rear, sheriff of Morgan county. On July 12, 1836, an attachment was issued for "William Lewis to appear before the July term now in session." On this writ there is no return.

In October, 1836, subpoenas were issued for Conyers, Hunt and Hawthorn. On October 6, 1836, Pleasant Rose filed an affidavit for continuance, reciting that he could not safely proceed to trial on account of the absence of John Berry, by whom he could prove that during the night in which William Lewis was assaulted at the house of John B. Witty, and for which assault this affiant is now indicted, this affiant did not wound, strike, beat or bruise, or in any way injure said Lewis; that the wounds and injuries inflicted upon the person of said Lewis on the night of the —— of ———, 1834, were inflicted by Sally Berry in a state of derangement, and not by this affiant. That this affiant was not, at the time these wounds and other injuries were inflicted in a situation to prevent their infliction, but was so entirely overpowered by mental agitation and derangement as to be unconscious of the events which were transpiring around him at the time said injuries were inflicted by said Sally Berry. This affiant lives sixty miles or more from this place (Springfield) and had made arrangements with John L. Witty to have his witnesses subpoenaed, said Witty living nearer this place than does this affiant. This affiant is informed, and believes that said Witty was mistaken in the time the present term of this court was to commence, and that it did commence one week sooner than he expected; that two trips were made by Witty to Springfield for the purpose of summoning witnesses about two weeks before court, etc.; that Berry, about two months ago, went to Schuyler county to work for four weeks and then return. Affiant thought he had returned, but he is now in Schuyler county, and affiant expects to have him here at the next term of this court, etc., etc.

On June 5, 1837, subpoenas were issued to the sheriff of Sangamon county commanding him to summon Bartlett Conyers, Nelson Asher and William Crow to appear for John L. Witty at the July term of the circuit court. Return "not served." On the same day subpoenas were

sent to Morgan county for John Lucas, Sylvester Hunt, James Conyer, Mary Witty and Isham Hayes, witnesses for John L. Witty, to appear at the July term, 1837; returned by A. Dunlap, sheriff of Morgan county, "not served, because witnesses are not residents of Morgan county." (They had not changed their place of residence, but were in that part of Morgan county that was organized into Cass county on March 3, 1837.)

Nothing further appears on the records, and the cases were dropped out of court without trial.